Which is Who?

Management decisions and tracking health records are just two uses of individual animal identification. How does one go about implementing and utilizing such a system? Patrick Davis, Missouri University Extension Regional Livestock Field Specialist, reminds producers, "A proper identification system starts with selecting a system that will uniquely identify the calf for the rest of its life." Finding the right system, and using it consistently is key to record management.

A producer can easily identify how old an animal is if the birth year and birth order are part of the code. There is a four-digit system and the letter and three-digit system. Using the four-digit system, the first number is the last digit of the year. The rest of the numbers represent birth order. For example, the identification of the 56th calf born in 2023 is 3056. One tricky part of this system is the potential for duplication of cows that are 10 years old with younger cows in the herd. For example, the second calf born in 2013 is number 3002, and the second calf born in 2023 is also 3002. This only becomes a problem when both females have been kept.

To alleviate this potential confusion, all major breed associations recommend using the international animal identification letter code. Each calendar year is assigned a letter by the Beef Improvement Federation, repeating every 22 years. The Letters I, O, Q and V are not used to avoid confusion with one, zero and the letter U. The letter assigned to year 2023 is L. The three-digit system uses this letter for the year and the remaining three digits are used for birth order. The letter is placed either at the beginning or the end. For example, Calf L056 is the 56th calf born in 2023.

In smaller herds that don't have more females than two digits can handle, it's common to drop the extra zero. This eliminates potential readability confusion and allows the identification code to be as large as possible on an ear tag.

After you've decided on a numbering system, choosing the form is next. There are many different display options: ear tags, hot brand, ear notch, freeze brand, electronic devices, tattoos, paint brands, neck chains and nose printing. The visibility and security of these options vary greatly. Ear tags, some electronic devices, neck chains, paint and freeze brands are all temporary. Permanent forms are hot brands, some electronic devices, tattoos, ear notches and nose prints.

In addition to the permanence varying, the visibility is not the same with all methods. For notes on birthing dates or checking for sick livestock, an observable method is highly preferred.

Some industries use specific methods; consider ear notching in swine operations or neck chains on dairies. Nearly all species make use of tattoos for individual identification, but reading tattoos while doing chores isn't the easiest job. Electronic devices require readers and other equipment to operate but can aid in record management and industry traceability. Paint brands are very temporary, used for sorting or in livestock sales. Nose prints are not at all useful at chore time. Each cow has a unique nose print, similar to a fingerprint.

Hot brands are generally used for ranch ownership rather than identifying individual animals. These are placed on the shoulder or the hip. While hot brands are highly visible, they are not useful for specific animals. Freeze brands, on the other hand, are specific to an individual. A freeze brand destroys the natural pigments of the hair, producing the growth of white hair. This relatively painless method of branding reduces hide damage. Freeze brands, while not always life-long, will last for several years.

Ear tags are the most commonly used method. They tend to be inexpensive and simple to get started with, requiring only the tag and applicator tool. There are MANY different brands of tags commercially available. Finding the style and brand that best suits your herd may take a few tries. Look for the style that doesn't pull out of the ear due to walking through brush or consuming hay through a bale feeder. Tags with numbers can be purchased or you can buy blank tags and write your information.

Next time, we'll discuss record keeping for profit. For more information on how to implement an identification system as well as how to use that system to improve performance and profitability give me a call at the Labette County Extension Office 620-784-5337.

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